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Former councilman operated CIA front

By ANDREW PETKOFSKY

During the late 1950s and into 1960, one member of Richmond City Council augmented his public duties by working for the Central Intelligence Agency.

John Edward Lawler, a former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who became an immensely popular councilman, says he had been quietly associated with the CIA for some time when he took his seat on council in 1956.

He began accepting assignments from the then-fledgling intelligence agency soon after he retired in 1950 as special agent in charge of the Richmond FBI office.

PHONY RESEARCH FIRM

One of Lawler's CIA jobs was running a phony research organization in Richmond that served as a front for a CIA training and payroll operation. He continued that task during his tenure on council and after he stepped down in 1960.

"I did it as a patriotic citizen," he said in an interview at his home on Riverside Drive in South Richmond.

If Old Dominion Research Co. (later the Old Dominion Research Fund) was a creation of the CIA, it was by no means unique. Dozens of foundations and non-profit organizations that used tax money to pay students, scholars, diplomats and news reporters to gather information for the spy agency were identified in articles and government investigations in the mid-1960s.

Although the Old Dominion organization never was exposed as a CIA front, it fits the pattern of other CIA-

run organizations that posed as foundations in order to pay students and scholars to collect intelligence abroad.

WORKSHOP FOR AGENTS

Lawler said CIA officials also periodically used the Old Dominion office — and the streets of Richmond — as a workshop for training agents in spying and other undercover techniques.

The CIA, for its part, has declined to say whether the operations in Richmond existed. But the agency's response to The Richmond News Leader's request under the federal Freedom-of-Information Act does not contradict Lawler's limited recollections of his undercover work.

As he sat at a glass table on the glassed-in porch behind his house, Lawler, now 73, was not eager to discuss the details of his CIA service or the history of Old Dominion Research.

He had agreed to an interview as a necessary consequence of having donated a large collection of personal papers and documents to the Virginia Commonwealth University library.

APPLICATIONS FOR GRANTS

The collection, comprising 102 folders and filling five cubic-foot cartons, includes one folder of documents concerning the CIA front company. Most of the papers in the folder are applications for overseas research grants or letters from Lawler approving research projects in Europe and the Middle East.

If they were not identified as CIA documents by Lawler and in the table of contents prepared by the VCU library staff — and by the inclusion in the same folder of a mid-1960s newspaper editorial commenting on then-recent exposure of some foundations as CIA fronts — the precise nature of Lawler's files wouldn't be obvious. Some of the documents raise questions, however.

One 1959 letter from a George Cannon of the Hudson Research Society in New York City advised Lawler that a "revised purpose" had been chosen for the organization.

"We can call this a society, fund, foundation, council, association, etc., whichever you feel you can best run."

wrote, "you perhaps have not taken sufficiently into account the fact that, as a practicing lawyer whose career has been temporarily interrupted at least from a financial standpoint, your status is considerably different from many other fellowship grantees sent abroad under Fulbright or other programs... it is our desire that your financial position will enable you to entertain people at your home or elsewhere."

A number of the documents in the folder are letters from other foundations or consulting firms asking Lawler to sign letters and send them on to whomever they are addressed.

Although Lawler recalled colorful anecdotes about his crime-and-communist-fighting days in the FBI (where he was an administrative assistant to J. Edgar Hoover for several years) and his years on City Council (where he garnered more votes than any other candidate in one campaign), he maintained that he never knew much about what went on in Old Dominion Research's offices.

What he did know, he insisted, he since has forgotten.

'VANISHES IN TIME'

"It just vanishes in time," Lawler said with an air of finality.

Nonetheless, in two interviews more than a year apart, Lawler did not leave the impression that he is a forgetful man. Short and trim, white-haired and dressed on the second visit in sporty clothing accented with powder blue socks and white patent leather shoes, Lawler appeared to be friendly, good-humored, sharp-witted and proud of the many turns his career's as a law enforcement official, business executive and lawyer had taken.

Before he left for an afternoon of card-playing at the Commonwealth Club one recent snowy morning, he showed off an extensive and neatly

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